

TITLE: Environmental Assessment for proposed reintroduction of a migratory flock of whooping cranes in the eastern United States

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

For the reasons briefly presented below and based on an evaluation of the information contained in the supporting references enumerated below, I have determined that

Reintroduction of the whooping crane (Grus americana) into historic habitat within a 20-state nonessential experimental population (NEP) area within the eastern United States as described under Alternative 2 in the Environmental Assessment(EA)

is not a major Federal action which would significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will, accordingly, not be prepared.

Reasons:

The Biological Opinion prepared for this action has concluded that only one federally-listed species, the Karner blue butterfly, is likely to be adversely affected by the preferred alternative, and those effects are expected to be minor. Therefore, on the basis of adverse effects to listed species, the preparation of an EIS is not warranted.

Implementation of the preferred alternative is not expected to have significant adverse effects on the existing natural, wild migratory population of whooping cranes. The location of this reintroduction was specifically chosen because of the low probability of interaction between the two populations, to preclude the transference of disease or undesirable behaviors between the two groups. While it is possible that whooping cranes from either population may stray into the range occupied by the other, it is believed there is a very low likelihood that any significant numbers will interact on a regular basis, thereby making the probability of adverse effects very low.

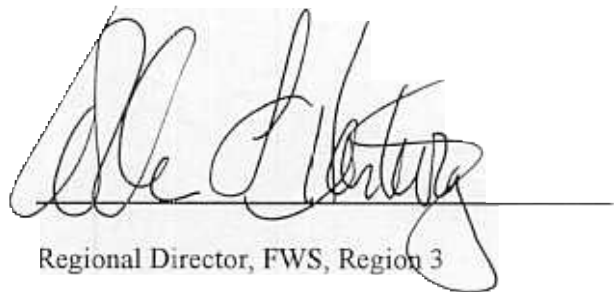
- 3 As the whooping cranes used for this reintroduction will be produced at currently existing, captive breeding centers, there will be no impacts to the existing natural, wild flock of whooping cranes. Prior to publication of the proposed rule for this action, (66 Federal Register 14107, March 9, 2001), the Acting Director determined that the whooping cranes to be used for this reintroduction project are not essential to the continued existence of the species.
4. Implementation of the preferred alternative will result in whooping crane reintroduction through designation and establishment of a nonessential experimental population within a 20-state area in the eastern United States. The NEP area will be designated and project implementation will commence with publication of the Final Rule for this action.
- 5 Under the preferred alternative of designating the introduced population as nonessential, there will be minimal impacts to the biological environment within the action area, including vegetation and other wildlife species (page 33 of the EA, and Biological Opinion).

6. Under the preferred alternative of designating the introduced population as nonessential, there will be minimal impacts to adjacent and migration corridor land use, such as agricultural and industrial use (page 40 of the EA).
7. As a result of implementation of the preferred alternative of designating the introduced population as nonessential, there will be no adverse impacts to historic or archaeological resources (page 46 of the EA).
8. Under the preferred alternative of designating the introduced population as nonessential, there will be minimal impacts to local socio-economic conditions, and any impacts will be mostly positive (page 46 of the EA).
9. Provisions within the rule designating the eastern United States whooping crane NEP will preclude adverse effects to hunting. Any hunter who accidentally kills a whooping crane would be exempt from penalties under the Endangered Species Act if the shooting is accidental and occurs incidental to otherwise lawful activity (i.e., hunting in accordance with all laws and regulations) (page 43 of the EA). We also have committed to no federally-mandated closures of areas or closures or modifications of hunting or conservation order seasons for purposes of protection of this population (page 42 of the EA). Therefore, there will be no significant adverse effects to hunting.
10. The status of any whooping cranes from the eastern United States NEP which stray outside of the NEP area will be considered as endangered. However, the Service has committed to monitoring movements of all the eastern United States NEP whooping cranes during the 10-year life of the project, and for any cranes venturing outside of the NEP area, attempts will be made to capture and relocate the individual, if judged desirable by the Service or requested by the affected State (proposed rule, FR 66 page 14115). This will preclude adverse impacts to hunting or land use activities. Because of the low likelihood that whooping cranes will wander outside the designated NEP area, we believe the potential for adverse effects to be very low.

All State wildlife agencies within the NEP area, along with three Flyway Councils and the Canada/United States Whooping Crane Recovery Team, have gone on record as in support of the reintroduction. Comments received from the public on the draft EA and proposed rule were largely supportive with some minor concerns, most of which were addressed within the final EA.

Supporting References:

- Environmental Assessment
2. Proposed Rule
- Biological Opinion



Regional Director, FWS, Region 3

Date: 6-18-01

Distribution:
Wash. DC (OEC)
GBFO